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ABSTRACT

A personal account of an English instructor's experiences with poetry therapy--the use of poetry to help people get in touch with, and begin dealing with, their problems and feelings--is provided in this paper. Among the topics dealt with are the following: the scope of poetry therapy, the instructor's early dissatisfactions with traditional English teaching methods, his first introduction to poetry therapy, some of his initial problems in teaching a poetry therapy course, the course organization that he eventually developed, incidents that show the value of the course to individual students, teaching techniques and assignments that have proved successful, goals of a poetry therapy course, and the teacher's role in poetry therapy. The paper includes excerpts from students' course evaluations as well as excerpts from students' writings that show how the course helped them reveal their feelings through poetry. (GT)

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"Poetry and the Self: A brief autobiographical overview of some successes and some flops using 'poetry therapy' techniques in conventional and experimental classes, with implications for English teachers anywhere."
(A paper originally delivered to the Annual Meeting of "California Association of Teachers of English, February 19, 1977.")

* * *

Let me start with a few remarks on the term "poetry therapy," which, you might notice, is put in quotation marks in the title of this presentation. I hope you understand that it carries those quotation marks with it every time I mention it. It's an unfortunate label, implying as it does that it refers to something more scientific, something more codified and refined, than it is. Some better, or at least some equally good labels might be: "poetry interchange," or "poetry growth experience." Yet we're stuck with "poetry therapy" as a term because it's already in widespread use.

"Poetry therapy" is not a doctrine; it has no body of beliefs, no great truth or truths to peddle. It is simply the use of poetry in any form to make it easier for people to get in touch with, and to begin dealing with, their problems, their conflicts, their need for growth, their often repressed feelings. It's an approach, an instrument. Rather than being a belief, it's something that can be used with virtually any belief or stance that respects human dignity.

In "poetry therapy" the poetry ought always to be less important than the people and their feelings. We pay no heed to esthetic quality or to any of the other English-teacher considerations. If the poetry does come to the front for very long, what happens is something else--poetry reading, poetry critiquing, writers' workshop activity--something other than what I'm talking about. Sometimes a session centers around poetry; sometimes no poems at all get used in an entire session. More often participants read poems--their own or others'--which trigger or catalyze emotional sharing, or emotional recognition or realization, or exploration. Often people in "poetry therapy" groups or classes write poems between sessions; sometimes they do so on the spot, responding in both of these ways to their own--or someone else's--emotions. Sometimes these poems are self-revealing, and other times they're ways of capturing on

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paper what's happened to or in a participant. This is valuable, for often people engaged in psychological processes don't fully realize at the time the importance of what they've done or learned, or tend to devalue it later for various reasons. The poem keeps these truths before them to do something with, or to do nothing with, as they choose. Often these poems about us by others have enormous impact. Even when participants in these processes are aware of their importance, the poems can serve to underline or to verify.

Now comes the autobiographical part of what I promised (or threatened) in describing this talk. I choose to teach this way because it's the best way I know to share with you some feeling for what I do, for where I'm coming from, for what my biases and prejudices are. In this way you (like students in my classes) are better prepared than with most teachers or lecturers to judge the truth and the value of what I'm saying. I hope you will take what you can use from what I give, and ignore or modify the rest. I'm not here to sell a package, or even to sell the contents piece by piece--only to offer.

The big question now arises: How did a decent, respectable English teacher, once safely married to English Lit., begin dallying with this saucy young thing, lose large hunks of his heart to her, and now come to live in near-bigamy? The sordid affair began, as most affairs do, I suppose, innocently enough. During my thousand-year sojourn in that Vale of Humiliation called graduate school, I was dumb enough, and frightened enough, rarely to question for long what I was being told. But when I got to teaching real people, much of the doctrine which had been inculcated onto me seemed useless. I bored myself teaching poetic meters and the like to students who were <u>also</u> bored by it, as <u>I</u> had been bored by it when <u>I</u> was a student. Yet I had to teach this--right?--because not to have done so in survey classes and introduction-to-literature classes would have been to shirk my professional responsibility. Or so I thought, not yet having gotten over my case of that dread fungus infection, the creeping litterachuahs.

I couldn't yet articulate my dissatisfaction, but I felt powerfully that I didn't want to perpetuate the kind of teaching I had had. Still, here I was, doing very much that--<u>at times</u>. Other times we had fun in the classroom. The trouble was, I felt guilty and apologetic after the fun times; <u>that</u> wasn't the "right" way to teach! Any <u>use</u> of literature, I <u>knew</u> must be a <u>prostitution</u> of literature.

And through these early years, including my part-time comp teaching stint as a grad student, most of what happened during my office conferences had little

to do directly with pedagogic matters. Most of my office-hour work consisted of picking up pieces of people who had been rejected and dissected, mashed and smashed, mauled and crumpled, by other teachers; patching them up with glue, tape, and staples; and sending these recycled people on their way with some encouragement. And of course I felt guilty about this too; I must be taking money from the State of California under false pretenses. Not only did what I was doing have nothing to do with education, but, I fancied in my psychological naivete, I might permanently maim these students through my ignorant, amateurish tampering with their lives and psyches. So I generally ended up listening sympathetically, and giving a lot of pompous advice (oh what a lot of advice!), with plenty of good will. But the advice was mostly bad, because it better fit me than it did the students I was giving it to.

I began finding out more than I then knew about psychology. If I was going willy-nilly to be a sort of counselor, I didn't want to be a half-ass one. I read; I attended workshops and extension courses; I learned from talking to others, including especially Helene (the woman I'm married to). I found myself bootlegging more and more into my classes that I'd been taught was unprofessional, and feeling more and more guilty.

Then, six years ago, one of the psychology book clubs offered a whole book on something called poetry therapy. The title itself excited me; the very existence of such a book and such an approach immediately suggested that there might be a legitimate way to bring into my classes what I had already been bringing in furtively. When I read the book I was not disappointed. Oh, I disliked or mistrusted some of the pieces in it, but even before I finished reading through the book, I sat down and drew up a draft prospectus for an anthology of poems that might be used with this approach. (When I reached the end I discovered a list [a very poor list I thought] of suggested works. The prospectus is still on my must-send-out pile--but the number of poems I'm trying to select from has grown four- or five-fold since then.) More important, I began confidently using more and more in my classes of what had earlier induced guilt.

The following fall Helene called my attention to a UCLA Extension course on Poetry and the Therapeutic Experience (taught by a man with Ph.D.'s in both Counseling and English), which I enrolled in. I learned a good deal, often had reservations--and began to write poems. I'd always been afraid to earlier. After all, when you're convinced that no one can write decent poetry without a thorough grounding in a knowledge of scansion and meter, and when there's nothing your're more repulsed by than scansion and meter, you don't write much poetry.

At the end of that quarter I was invited by the instructor of the course, Arthur Lerner of Los Angeles City College, to become one of the founding group of his Poetry Therapy Institute. We met regularly in training groups. And during the ensuing quarter I served as a facilitator for one of the experiential groups into which he divides his extension course. During this time too I led or co-led demonstration groups under the auspices of the Institute, including one at the first of three annual Poetry Therapy Weekends for UCLA Extension.

Shortly afterward I allowed my formal connection with the Institute to lapse, since it had little more to offer me professionally, since it made no provision for continued participation without further repetitious training, since its director had made it more and more into the kind of organization I didn't care to be affiliated with--and since he didn't appreciate my using poetry to drive home my objections. (I am, however, a certified member of the only other such organization in the country, the Association for Poetry Therapy, in New York.)

Before this I had begun working with "poetry therapy" on campus, not only by using the approach in my more conventional classes but by co-leading, with a colleague [Prof. Carolyn Owen], a non-credit group for our Explorations in Communication series. Her psychology and counseling background, and my literature and "poetry therapy" training made a good combination. We worked generally in complementary ways, often quite effectively, and rarely, if I can trust my memory, got in one another's way.

BUT at the start the two of us made a serious error. Because we're both cautious people, we thought we should lay down a couple of simple ground rules--a request for confidentiality concerning what went on during our sessions, and a statement about our approach (we were both basically Gestalt oriented at the time). Despite our having put these out with the best of intentions, and with no pressure, we were attacked with such vehemence that we wasted the first three sessions fighting off angry charges that we were being overly directive and manipulative. Perhaps these students were "veterans" of one or more groups--perhaps even "groupaholics" playing the "group-game." But I didn't know that at the time. At any rate, the course worked well enough that we felt pleased about our initial experiment. A year and a half later I offered another such course, by myself.

While we were leading this first group I was invited to teach the following year for our campus's General Honors Program. When I learned that I could make the Freshman Colloquium virtually anything I cared to that dealt with

communication, I had my two semesters center on dreams, myths and poems. Working with these two groups of students taught me much, and I have remained friends with some of them. In their lack of encounter group expertise (and their lack of cynicism and game-playing) these freshmen were beautiful to work with. They needed to have a lot of basic concepts and approaches explained--that took a lot of time. But what more than made up for this elementary run-through was their willingness and often their openness. They allowed me to affect them, and they certainly had an important, lasting impact on me.

During that year I proposed a new course for my department's upper-division "special topics" series, to be called, since the work "therapy" is taboo in the absence of professional training, and since no one wanted to offend any o. the departments offering therapeutically oriented courses, something innocuous: "Poetry and Human Relations" certainly sounded innocuous. My departmental Curriculum Committee refused to approve it, however, telling me it sounded like a good course, but not one that belonged in an English department. When I submitted a revised proposal later, shading the truth a bit by emphasizing the writing aspects of the course more than I had, Poetry and Human Relations was approved. English Department enrollment drops by then had made the department more willing to offer a course that promised to "generate" FTE (the magical "body-count" designation) from other disciplines. (One of my creative writing colleagues still feels bitterly that I am raping literature, that I do a disservice to Poetry (with a capital P), and that my course-- now called Poetry and the Self-- is responsible for some of hers' not drawing enough, and being canceled.)

How I looked forward to teaching that course! By now I knew everything that I needed to about "poetry therapy," and I'd told my classes about the new class. Everything was perfect: a small enrollment; a preponderance of students who had had classes with me before; decent preparation. To avoid grade pressure on people to open up, I announced the first day that all would get A's.

The course was one of the most educationally valuable things that has happened to me. It was also one of the two most disastrous teaching experiences I'd had since my days as a teaching assistant.

Whatever could have gone wrong seemed to. Students fought our sitting in a circle. Since the seminar room we met in had tables, they insisted on hiding their body language behind the protection of those tables. No one seemed willing to open up. After three or four sessions one woman walked out, since she could learn nothing important from a man. Rather than what I had hoped for

and expected, there was far less intimacy than exists in nearly all of my conventional classes. One student even came to curse me out for having promised her an A; "Now I won't do anything," she said.

And I panicked.

Instead of allowing matters to ride, I tried to press the class to work: I had so much invested in it after all! And of course that made things worse. After four or five weeks I even desperately tried appealing to the class to start over, start afresh. We had an occasional day or two of good work, but no more than that. I was relieved when the semester ended. Writing down some of those promised A's galled me.

What I learned from that fiasco has made succeeding semesters far different from what they would otherwise have been. I learned never to force. I learned never, never, never to teach this kind of course during the day, and never, never, to teach it in fifty-minute bits. Several times we'd seemed on the verge of doing something important and sustained--and then the period was over. Some of the people who had gotten in touch with their feelings refused to risk that again; they had to be "together" for a logic class or a chemistry exam the next hour, and how could they be if they were emotionally working through something so non-rational?

I learned also not to give grades in advance, except when they were conditional to some extent on attendance or participation. And I learned that when one or two people in a class are mistrusted by even a few others, I ought not try to handle this outside the class, but must insist that it come out openly during group sessions or feedback periods. Those are lessons that taught me what not to repeat. But I also learned something that I've been unable to change much, although it continues to present problems in this class.

The course's two aims, personal growth and instruction about the "poetry therapy" approach, often war with one another. I generally try to schedule each three-hour class--for I never teach it now except on this once-a-week basis--into a two-hour experiential session, and a thirty-to forty-minute didactic period. Often those who are there primarily for their own growth chafe at the didactic material. And a few who are there primarily to find out how to "therapize" others are virtual non-participants in the experiential groups, which I consider by far the more important function. However, I don't think this can be helped. I bring it up as a problem that should be recognized, but that's all I have to say about it here.

* *

Frequently my "poetry therapy" work has led to similar, occasional work with students in other kinds of classes. My mere mentioning of the existence of "poetry therapy" groups, combined with a relaxed atmosphere, has often been enough to lay groundwork for such broadly therapeutic experiences. Once, in a two-hour English Lit. Survey, we'd been discussing "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner." One of the students, a perceptive, able person, seemed quite disturbed, and gathered up her things as soon as the midway break started. When I asked why she was leaving, what was wrong, she said that some of the lines and phrases in the poem had gotten to her, reminding her of our polluting and poisoning of our oceans. This in turn led her to a more general depression; other things in her life were troubling her. I told her how much I hoped she would stay, and began mentioning some more optimistic data that suggested the planet still had a chance. We briefly went over the basis for hope in Coleridge's poem as well.

Whether it was this specific talking that worked, or whether it was simply that the talk itself showed that our large campus didn't have to keep us impersonally apart, the woman felt much better, and remained. Her emotions were far more pressing, immediate and relevant than was the material we were delayed in returning to. We had gone on talking for ten minutes into the next class period, time neither of us considered wasted. And two weeks before my presentation of this paper, when I attended a professional theatrical performance in which she was appearing, she greeted me by returning the hug I'd given her then, though we hadn't seen or heard from one another in three years. Those few minutes in class still constitute the basis of our friendship.

Another time, in a Victorian poetry class, a student was so obviously affected by her panel's beginning to discuss Tennyson's elegy In Memoriam that I interrupted to check out with her "where she was at." "At" turned out to be her impasse over the death of her father ten years before. The interruption, and her willingness to say what had gotten to her, led to a fruitful class discussion the following meeting day, and to a series of individual office conferences that complemented some psychiatric sessions she told me she was involved in. Again, in addition to one person's getting something for herself, the class learned something about genuine emotions in a poem that had seemed to several of them too wordy and preachy to be effective or affecting.

These incidents don't stand alone; they merely illustrate how closly the teaching and counseling functions can come to one another, and how closely

together they've become for me. To an extent I had never imagined possible, they've molded my previously discrete identities.

Even a class as dry-sounding and as unsubjective as Technical Writing provided such a link, or rather, perhaps, illustrated the utility of my being m same self in more and more of my world in recent years. A week or so after I'd touched on my interest in "poetry therapy," in one of these classes, and had shared two of my poems with the students, I found a poem waiting on the table at the start of a class hour. It wasn't a great poem, and by objective standards not even a good one. But it was a poem that touched me, and that I still feel was important. Here was a student, an Army veteran retraining to teach Industrial Arts after his aerospace assembly-line job had evaporated, the last "type" I would have expected a poem from if I'd still been thinking in the stereotypes of my graduate school training, reaching out to share his feelings with me, and through my reading aloud of his poem (with his permission), with the rest of the class.

Whatever else happened in that class that semester, I feel good about encouraging someone who will be out teaching others, to open himself up to the world. And such was the atmosphere in the class that no one even came close to smirking or in any other way showing either embarrassment or annoyance. I interpret the incident as one more example of how "poetry therapy" helped make one small corner of the world a little bit easier to live in, a little bit freer of discomfort and pain perhaps. And that, as I understand it, is a large part of what any kind of therapy is all about.

Another time, a lower-division survey class was having a hard time getting at what was happening in Wordsworth's long autobiographical poem The Prelude. When it became obvious that I was doing all the work, and, more importantly, that the class wasn't really getting much out of the poem, I stopped pushing. I dropped the written poetry for the moment (a half-hour moment as it turned out), and led the class into a guided fantasy opening that I'd earlier experienced, one which brought each participant back to her or his elementary school days, engaging in dialogue with his or her younger self, and eventually either saying goodbye to that self or bringing it along into the present.

After a number of class members had voluntarily shared their responses and reactions with the rest of us, I shifted back to The Prelude--not abruptly or arbitrarily, pointing out as we went that the difficulties and complexities of the Wordsworth poem were related to these guided fantasies we'd been through together. The creative processes involved in both were essentially the same,

and both creative acts served to remind us of what we were supposed to know already--that poetry is basically emotional. Furthermore, both the Wordsworth poem and each of the guided fantasies seemed to serve another similar function, whether intended to or not: to show us how we begin to define ourselves as individuals in the world by seeing how others, and "the world," respond to us. Finally, now that we had realized through the guided fantasies that (and how) we still carried our "little me's" within us even into later years, we were at the same time more in touch with ourselves, and better able to see what a great poet had done with that identical awareness.

Even those still unable to come to grips with Wordsworth had gotten something for themselves, something they might later pursue for increased self-growth and self-awareness. The closeness of dreaming and poetic creation was also something the class later had a chance to explore further, in studying and experiencing Coleridge's "Kubla Khan," and "Christabel," and "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner." During the one "interrupted" class hour we had done something entirely relevant to the content of the class, and had gotten a bonus for ourselves.

In still other classes and groups when I've used guided fantasies, students have been able to take off from them and go directly into writing prose descriptions of them, or poems based on their reactions to their own fantasies, or on their reactions to others' fantasies.

And these waking dreams are useful to work with when a "poetry therapy" group isn't in the mood for "poetry therapy" work, or even for poetry sharing. The fantasies are a form of oral poetry, or a matrix from which poems can be born. They're a super way of inviting or luring--not forcing--poems out of people who claim to be unpoetic, unimaginative, uncreative.

Related to this guided fantasy work is a triggering assignment I've used in comp classes, an assignment I stole from one of my colleagues, Paulino Lim. It asks students to describe their lives, or some aspect of their lives, using a single extended metaphor or simile. These metaphoric sketches have gotten normally closed-up people into more intimate touch with themselves than they had previously been. Sometimes even playful responses to this assignment reveal important truths. And the metaphoric revelation, in much the same manner as fantasy revelation, or poem revelation, usually doesn't seem as threatening, or as violating of one's space, as less oblique ones, though it's as important.

Two years ago Judy Alpert wrote this moving piece:

I am a candle burning in the room of life. The room is

comfortably dark. My glow sufficient to see things well, although there are corners that need to be explored.

If I explain my structure you will understand me better. My wick is made of strong, enduring fiber. The inner layers of wax closest to my core are red veined with blue. The emotionality of the red is tempered by an intellectual and spiritual blue.

Moving outward there is layer upon layer of various pastel waxes. On the outside of me, sharp forms as well as smooth areas have been created by these layers of wax. They represent the people of my life, and experiences I have had. Some have left a layer of wax which completely covers my entire core. Others have left finely sculptured areas. Still others have left dribbles which I hope will be easily burnt away.

While I glow, my inner core of red and blue will be quite visible, yet toned by the layering of pastels. At times my fire will be brilliant, other times barely breathing. Dark days my fire can illuminate the room. On brighter days, my glow can still offer a special light flattering to the viewer.

In all, I am just a candle, at times beautiful, at times plain. While always attempting to make things clear, I add a little warmth and atmosphere to the room.

Earlier this semester Rick Cameron responded with this:

I'm like a hinge. A large number of people screw me up, some put me down, and others would just rather nail me to the wall. I think it's just because they're too lazy to try and understand me. Sometimes people tell me that I'm very onesided, but that's just because they've built walls around me. I try to just ignore what people say about me; after all my life doesn't hinge upon it, or does it? Anyway I'll go on no matter what people may say about me; I have a strong central core that holds me together. I have a lot of screwy friends that I hang around with and they give all the support I really need.

Although people tend to use me, unconsciously I might add, at home, in school, in private, or publicly, I still hang around with open arms to greet them. But still they pass me by and rush on their way.

I'm really a swinger. I've got some really smooth moves, but people just don't seem to realize it. I do most of my swinging during the day when I might engage in an occasional waltz with someone who's not sure whether he's coming or going. Although I stay home nights I really can't get any rest until everyone is in and asleep. Then I protect the homes in which I live. You might say I hold things together by giving my total support.

So next time you see me don't just pass me by. Stop! and say hi. Don't be too formal. You can just call me Hinge, something to adore.

And what Bruce Baral wrote in 1975, after some boringly abstract earlier writings, is both philosophically truthful and wittily poetic:

I often wish my life was as romantic and as predictable as that of a fiddler-on-the-roof, but I am afraid it is more like that of a toilet-in-a-public-restroom. Oh, do not get me wrong; it is not a bad life. In fact, I feel very useful. I mean, people really need me; my services are often paramount in maintaining the composure and integrity of scores of individuals every day.

Unfortunately, the rewards for my efforts are often rather shallow. I stand there all day long taking shit from everyone, and all I get is a little pat on my lever. Some people do care enough to spend time relaxing with me, often sharing newspapers and magazines. This usually has the effect of breaking down their defenses, and I can often catch them with their pants down, so to speak. But most of the time people just rush in and spill their guts to me, expecting me to take it all in, in one sitting.

Sometimes I reach a point where I just take too much.

When that happens I plug up and close off the world. These are the times I find out who my real friends are. Most people take one look, realize my dysfunction, and leave me alone. But some relentless souls keep trying to use me, swearing and kicking me when I do not respond. If it gets bad enough I have to see someone about my troubles for a change. After a little prodding and poking I usually snap out of it, and despite looking a little flushed, I am normally at full force by the end of the day.

Indeed, my life has a lot of problems with loose ends, but I try to keep a reservoir of solutions. In fact, I really believe I am one of the most important fixtures in everyone's life. If I sound a little too egotistical, you probably know how to close my mouth.

* *

The main use of "poetry therapy" techniques in the college setting is, as I see it, to break down the barriers between conventional classroom expectations and behavior, and expectations and behavior normally associated with therapy groups and growth groups. My preference, however, is to start working with "therapeutic" techniques in groups slowly. During a one- or two-hour demonstration workshop or anything of that nature, this luxury is out of the question, but in a school setting I've worked best by building a climate of relaxation and trust, one in which people feel confortable enough to open up willingly and spontaneously. I once allowed a Freshman Honors Colloquium centered around "poetry therapy" to meet for three weeks before doing more than share poems with one another. I didn't regard this as wasted time, since these were all freshmen, and since their "contract" in signing up for the class had not committed them specifically to anything like a "therapy" experience. Similarly, with conventional classes, I don't even mention such a thing as "poetry therapy" till after this sort of climate has already been established.

I see my function as a teacher not as providing psychotherapy, which I'm not trained or licensed to do, but rather as providing a nourishing atmosphere in which therapeutic experiences can occur with a minimum of difficulty, obstruction, derailing, or poisoning--an atmosphere in which students or group members are more willing than they otherwise would be to take the risks without which

intimacy, openness and growth are impossible or unlikely. I encourage my students' openness by opening up first myself, reading some of my more self-revealing poems, and by being vulnerable in other ways, sharing with them my experiences and feelings whenever these seem relevant to what's going on or whenever they're too strong to ignore.

In this therapeutic classroom I try to establish, I use "poetry therapy" techniques to lead into and to reinforce the kind of teaching human, humanistic teachers like to aim for. To extend this a little further, I make very little distinction of tone between my teaching (in and out of the classroom) and whatever counseling I do (on and off the campus).

Of course I make mistakes. I will no doubt make others. But I no longer poison myself or torture myself over this. As I learn more, I do an increasingly better job; all I can do at any time is the best I am capable of at that time. If I had waited till I was perfectly trained before beginning to try out these new techniques, I'd still be waiting to begin. A Chinese proverb I like says that the man who must know exactly where his next step will take him will spend his whole life standing on one leg. A noted political scientist, Charles Grove Haines, once asked a committee of his colleagues after they all had debated two hours over whether to pass the doctoral candidate they had just examined, "Gentlemen, are we preparing the man to teach in this world or the next?" I assume that, however fallible I am, because I deal with my students as fellow human beings, and because I can share my fallibility with them, I can work with them without threatening or destroying their dignity, yet at the same time without giving them dishonest notions of how much they know or can do.

This fallibility of mine strikes me as the very opposite of the pseudo-certainty that comes with labeling. Although they disagree on much, Arthur Lerner and Jack J. Leedy, heads of the two poetry therapy organizations and pioneers in promoting the use and the study of the new discipline, both solidly advocate diagnosing and categorizing group members before beginning to work with a new group. Further, both are wed to the "medical model," which assumes in its premises and in its language that leaders or teachers are dealing with "sick" people who can then be "cured." Both men developed their approaches and received their training largely in institutional (clinic or hospital) settings, so their leaning is understandable. But I part company with them here. With only "normal neurotics," as in a college setting, I strongly oppose the "medical model" in favor of using the "growth model" almost exclusively. Our "clientele"

seem to call for this instead.

As little as I hold with labeling generally, diagnoses--even in academic settings--can be invaluable SO LONG AS THEY'RF NOT VOICED AS DIKTATS. They can then be used, as can any other hunches, to help me select an appropriate poem or statement with which to initiate work. For example, if I perceive what I think is a person's characteristic reluctance to say directly what she or he wants--such as in his or her habit of unnecessarily asking permission to read something instead of simply saying, "I'd like to read this," I might read this poem of mine:

YOU DON'T WANT TO HEAR A POEM, DO YOU?

This isn't a very good poem.

I probably shouldn't read it to you.

It's not really very interesting,

except maybe to me.

Everybody will be bored by it.

I hope you'll forgive me for reading it.

I know I shouldn't keep talking about myself.

I just wrote it down;

It still needs a lot of work.

Sorry.

If my "diagnosis" has been correct, the other person might open up and be willing to talk about this difficulty. If I've been wrong, all that's wasted is the minute or so it's taken to read the poem. I haven't labeled the person by saying anything as "off-putting" as, "Your problem is that you're afraid to ask for what you want." Most other "mind-reading" of this kind can likewise be far more effectively handled with poems.

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To give you a flavor of how the Poetry and the Self class tastes, I'll include some excerpts from a few end-of-semester critiques. I refuse to omit these through false modesty. I have a good idea of what I don't do overly well as a teacher, and I have an equally clear idea of what I do well. One woman wrote, in part:

> You...are a most refreshing escape from the "ivory tower." You are all that I expect from a human being--and that is to be human. Not many people allow themselves that enjoyable freedom. I appreciate your honesty, your sincerity, your humor, your willingness to be exposed, to risk, to care. I am aware also that you are in touch with the shadowy sides of yourself. You struggle too. But you know who you are and what is good for you. I like that. Many times in class I experienced you as being uncomfortable and feeling awkward--that's OK, because it is at those moments that I know you are still reachable, touchable, and imperfect, like me. I am thankful for you. You are a crazy, loveable man.
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> . . . . . .
>
> The theme of the course spilled over naturally to my husband. He wrote some beautiful feeling poems during these weeks. I've also used poetry as therapy in my classroom with third graders.
>
> For me the value of this whole thing is that I can express my feelings in writing before they disappear or are repressed. I can share my feelings about someone else in writing when I'm not always able to say it face to face. I can be free and spontaneous. I can say whatever I want. Doing this on paper makes it easier to do it on a person-to-person basis.
>
> (Judith S.)

Another woman, about my own age--and a poet, with a master's in Psychology--tried coming to terms with the semester largely in the jargon of her discipline, but also broke through at times, as when she tried tentatively to determine why

poetry should work as therapy:

> Many philosophers . . . consider analogical explanation to have little scientific value (Freud was criticized for it); but for the individual I think there is no question that analogies have deep, significant meaning. Poetry uses analogy, and the poem itself can be an anology or a metaphor. The result is that we objectify our experience, just as science objectifies knowledge by using a model. The description of a flower in a poem can offer the reader a mirror of any aspect of his/her humanity that can be looked at and reflected upon. But while often scientific explanation alienates, a poem gives us an explanation that does not take away our humanity . . . poetry offers a way of describing what is undescribable in any other way.
>
> (Juliet B.)

A man in one of the classes, an English major who makes his living exterminating more tangible pests than most of us ex-English majors try to kill off professionally wrote,

> I feel this course took an organic approach in its presentation and development. There were no specific goals to be attained, or inflexible guidelines to be followed . . . I found this very enjoyable and exciting. Each meeting was a surprise, a unique experience.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> I felt absolutely no pressure from the instructor to perform. I did feel obligated to attend class, which is a rarity . . . It is a paradox that I wish other instructors and administrators would realize--that the more the student experiences, the more he or she feels personally responsible for what happens in each session. At least I felt that way. If something was happening I did not like or agree with, I was as much to blame for remaining silent and allowing the situation to continue.

> For myself, the class was more an experience of personal interaction and group awareness, with poetry used . . . to get the group process rolli g. The instructor was a moderator who never forced or pushed, and yet did not allow talk to bog down in one particular area to the point that the class became boring.
>
> I have never experienced a class in all my seventeen years of "education" where I actually got to know so many people so personally, and where I felt perfectly comfortable to express myself. Again, this type of group sharing involves a far more intense degree of responsibility than the normal class where all one need do is sit back passively allowing the instructor to "teach" at you until he or she tires, or class time runs out. In this particular course, . . . if you want to get something valuable you've got to be willing to . . . take a chance, take a step into an unknown territory . . . .
>
> (Mark W.)

Some of the most important work never gets shared with the whole class or the whole group. Often I get this in the form of poems that haven't been read aloud but that are turned in along with, or as part of the critiques at the close of each semester. One woman who shared her pain only once out loud wrote this powerful poem:

OF SWEATY PALMS AND OILY SKIN

Sweaty, saggy, sticky, smeared.
Nervous palpitations thump
Against my shaky skin.
Dry moth-wings flapping in my throat.
Clotted with words choked back by fear,
Of you and him and her and them.
But most of all of me;
Of what I am or might be

If those words could be dislodged
To tumble out into your laps

Would I then be left with nothing
But my empty fear still silently churning?
Would it be abated then?
Could you take it away with you?
I think I'll put my finger in my throat,
And vomit it all over!

(Linda V.)

And one extremely formal man, who began by talking and writing very indirectly around his feelings, came back for a second semester and wrote:

THIS IS A POEM?

I've got gas.
I feel like one-long-esophagus-full of compressed gas;
From my tongue to my butt, bubbling and gurgling;
My instinct is to sit like a sphinx and blow
it out my ass!

(Rich C.)